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Tim's First Tour

John Price

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My older son Tim was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the US Army Reserves May 10, 2002, at Virginia Tech, where he had been a member of the Corps of Cadets for four years. He graduated in the top ten percent of his class and was awarded the Commandant's Cup for excellence. As a former enlisted Military Police (MP), I was the first to salute the newly minted "butter bar," and as we shook hands he palmed me a silver dollar coin engraved with his name, rank, and date of commissioning. I cannot describe the intense feelings of love and pride I felt at that ceremony, realizing my son would soon be leading a platoon of MPs.

Tim's commissioning took place two weeks after the start of Military Police Officers Basic at Fort Leonard Wood so he had to wait until the next class began to start his training. He spent the next two months working as a gold bar recruiter trying to convince potential cadets to enter the army ROTC program at Tech. He always did his best at any task he was assigned and was awarded an engraved plaque in recognition of his recruiting efforts before leaving for Missouri for OBC.

We stayed in touch with him by e-mail during his training, but the days were long and grueling, so we never heard as much from him as we hoped. He told us that the OBC graduation ceremony was no big deal and not to worry about taking time off work to attend. I felt guilty not being there but rationalized that I had a lot going on at work and there would always be other opportunities.

Tim had his car packed before graduation and began the trip from Rolla, Missouri, to Richmond, Virginia, the afternoon of the ceremony. He called and said he would get a room on the road and be home sometime the next day. I was surprised when I heard the door opening at 4:30 a.m. He had driven the 925 miles straight through in 13.5 hours.

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After a bear hug and a handshake, I made a pot of coffee and we spent the next three hours going over his training. He sketched out some of the practical exercises on a pad at the kitchen table and I was impressed with his tactical ability. He finally ran out of gas and slept for most of the day. When he got up, he was off to catch up with his friends; we didn't see much of each other the next few days.

He had orders to report to his first duty station at Giessen, Germany, and we drove to Portsmouth in separate vehicles to drop off his car for shipment to Germany. This was one of the perks of being an officer.

A week later, I took him to the Richmond airport and his mother, younger brother Tommy, and I watched his plane depart, not knowing when we would next see him. We felt the mixed emotions of seeing a loved one off to do his duty: the pride of being part of his life, knowing we would miss him, and worry about the danger he might face if we went to war. I was unsettled and apprehensive as I drove home, already missing my son.

When Tim arrived in Germany he found out his unit, the 527th MP Company, was already in Kuwait, part of the troop build-up there. He was anxious to join them but spent weeks doing all the things the Army requires including paperwork, immunizations, and qualification with the M-4 and M-9 weapons he would carry. His car arrived before he shipped out and he explored the German countryside during his off-duty hours.

As the rhetoric heated up and George W. Bush delivered an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein, Tim was still stranded in Germany. His e-mails told me how frustrated he was at not having been shipped to Kuwait. His nightmare was that the conflict would begin before he assumed command of his platoon. That was exactly what happened as ground operations began

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on March 20, 2003. Tim could only watch the largest attack by coalition forces since the Korean War. He wanted to be a part of the invasion, but it started without him.

He finally caught a ride into Iraq on a huge C-17 transport, but they couldn't land at Baghdad International Airport because it was still under mortar attack. He spent the night in an aircraft hangar at Basra and flew out the following morning on a smaller, nimbler C-130. Tim finally joined his unit and met with his company commander and the other officers. The company commander told him he would be taking over First Platoon, but hadn't mentioned to the female platoon leader currently in charge of the First that she was moving into a staff position. When she asked Tim what he was going to be doing, he said he was the first platoon leader, and she went off on him, saying that was her platoon and there must be some mistake. Things were finally ironed out, but it was a rough way to be integrated into a combat unit in Baghdad. It took a couple of weeks but Tim and the female lieutenant patched things up.

I had warned Tim to be deferential to his platoon sergeant. They were functioning just fine before Tim got there and he would have to prove he would be an asset, not a liability, before any of his troops would follow him. After about a week the platoon sergeant assembled the soldiers of the First and told them the new lieutenant was a "keeper" and they were to protect him until he got the lay of the land.

Baghdad was referred to as the "Wild West" at that time, lawless since the Iraqi military and police force had been disbanded. American commanders took a hands-off posture while there was looting and dozens of revenge killings every night as previously oppressed Shiites settled scores with their Sunni oppressors. Packs of starving feral dogs roamed the streets and began eating the bodies of murdered Iraqis. Tim's first day on patrol was spent cleaning up

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partially eaten human remains that had baked in the sun for a day or two. None of his training had prepared him for the grim reality of working in a country sliding into civil war.

Each platoon leader was assigned a sector of Baghdad and was told to find a suitable building to use as headquarters for new Iraqi police stations. Once the building had been selected, squatters had to be moved out. Efforts were made to peacefully relocate squatters, usually including giving them a small amount of money to find new housing.

Tim hired police trainees, but many were illiterate and casual about showing up for work. Other American officers became frustrated with the unreliability and ignorance of their Iraqi policemen (IP) and treated them badly. Tim took a different approach and realized he could not compare the Iraqis to his well-trained volunteer force of American MPs. He accepted them for what they were and redoubled training efforts. His approach proved more effective than that of other officers.

The honeymoon after initial combat operations were over proved brief and embittered. Unemployed members of Saddam's army and police forces quickly coalesced into an opposition force. Weapons were readily available in Baghdad as coalition forces, in their race to Baghdad, had bypassed huge caches of small arms, ammunition, artillery rounds, hand grenades, mortars, and RPGs. In early attacks on IP stations, insurgents overran some stations killing the IPs who did not flee. One of Tim's stations was attacked while some of his MPs were there in training roles. His MPs, leading the defense of the station with IP support, repulsed the attack, killing 15 insurgents in the process. This was a huge morale booster for the IPs and the insurgents learned a costly lesson.

Weeks later, Tim and all the MP officers in Baghdad were at a meeting when a huge explosion rocked their building. They raced to the windows to see where the explosion had

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occurred. It was the IP station under the control of a platoon leader Tim had graduated from Tech with. There was a plume of smoke curling hundreds of feet upward into the superheated air above the shattered building. This was the largest truck bomb detonated to date in Baghdad and scores of IP's and residents had been killed or maimed. High-ranking officers rushed to the scene to take control of the situation, ignoring the lieutenant nominally in charge of the facility. The force of the explosion ripped off the entire front of the police station. Broken glass had shredded those in offices toward the front of the building. The blast had dismembered many of the corpses and random body parts protruded from piles of rubble.

Tim approached his classmate, the lieutenant responsible for the facility, and calmly asked, "What can I do to help?" His fellow corps grad was gratified to hear those words of support and the two young officers waded into the carnage side by side, looking for survivors.

Operation Iraqi Freedom 1 was a learning exercise for coalition forces and soon deteriorated into an occupation of a country with no internal leadership. Saddam was in hiding, his two brutal sons had been killed, members of the Baath Party were banned from holding positions of responsibility, and the insurgency gathered momentum.

Two weeks after the truck bomb explosion, one of Tim's IPs, Ali, was nearly killed in a drive-by shooting in front of his police station. He had an AK-47 round lodged deep in his body with the tip of the bullet touching his spinal cord. At that time, the US military did not provide any medical services for IPs, and the man was taken to an Iraqi hospital. Tim visited Ali frequently and saw his health decline during the first week. The Iraqi doctors had neither the expertise nor equipment to remove the bullet without killing the man. The prognosis was that he would die within the next week. Tim was determined that Ali would get the same treatment any of his MPs would have, had they been wounded.

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He worked his way up his chain of command requesting that his Iraqi policeman be admitted to an army hospital for surgery. This was against army policy and Tim put his career on the line each time he made the request. With a careful mixture of tact and perseverance he finally prevailed. One high-ranking officer was heard to say, "Get this fucking bulldog of a lieutenant off my ass." Rather than censuring him, the top brass finally acceded to his request and the IP was taken to the army facility and operated on.

The attending surgeon told Tim that Ali would have been dead within a couple of days without the surgery. He would survive, but would likely be paralyzed from the waist down. Ten weeks later, Ali limped into the police station on crutches to thank Tim for saving his life. He gave Tim an ornate brass Koran holder as a gift and embraced him. The lesson was not lost on the rest of Tim's IPs.

Tim's platoon quickly became the go-to unit for high profile assignments, serving as personal security detail for many VIPs, including the commander-in chief when he visited the troops for Thanksgiving dinner in 2003. Tim split his platoon, remaining with two squads guarding Air Force One, while his other two squads accompanied the president to the Bob Hope Dining Facility for dinner and his address to the troops. Security was tight, and the usually unflappable presidential Secret Service detail was nervous with POTUS in a war zone. Tim's easy humor and expertise in Baghdad had a calming effect. Everyone was relieved when Air Force One took off from Baghdad International that evening.

The two squads guarding the president's plane had missed out on the traditional turkey dinner and drove to the dining facility in search of leftovers. Once his troops were fed, Tim found his way into the executive dining room and discovered platters of leftover lobster tails and filet mignon. He ate six lobster tails and headed back to the company area after a long day. His

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best buddy, Mike Hong, another platoon leader from the 527th, woke up when Tim came in. Tim was so excited about the day and the lobster tails, he told Mike the whole story. When Mike asked, "Did you bring me one?" Tim was embarrassed that he hadn't thought about it. Mike grunted in disappointment and went back to sleep.

Tim also handled VIP security details for the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of the Army, and comedian Robin Williams who flew in for a USO show. There was a plan to capture or kill Moqtada al Sadr, leader of a major Shiite militia, and Tim's platoon was to be responsible for getting the Special Ops team in and out of Sadr City alive. The plan sounded like a suicide mission, and he was glad to hear it had been aborted.

The day he was eligible for promotion to first lieutenant, Tim replaced his butter bars with shiny new silver ones. He was also awarded a Bronze Star for his efforts.

Before he could leave Giessen, he had to confirm that none of his soldiers was suffering from PTSD, and as the platoon leader, he was last to depart on leave. I got an e-mail telling me he would be delayed for a week because he had been selected to mentor another MP unit that was shipping out for Baghdad. I was disappointed, but recognized how much good he could do passing on what he had learned during his combat tour. One night in mid-March, as I headed upstairs to bed, the doorbell rang. I couldn't imagine who would ring my doorbell at 11 p.m. When I flipped on the porch light and saw a soldier in BDUs standing there, I wondered what was going on. It took a few seconds for me to realize it was my son. I tore open the door and gave him a bear hug. We both smiled at each other until it hurt. He came into the house and I cracked open a couple of beers.

It took a few minutes for me to ask, "How did you get here?"

"Amber gave me a ride."

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“Well, where is she?”

“Sitting in her car outside.”

“For God’s sake, ask her to come in.”

I gave another big hug to Tim’s school friend who had picked him up at the airport.

“Did I surprise you?”

“You sure as hell did, I didn’t even recognize you standing on the porch.”

Tim was a notorious practical joker and had planned and executed this surprise visit perfectly. I was overwhelmed with relief to see him, and to find he would be home for four weeks. He had been on planes the entire day, having stopped in Philly for a few hours to see his mother. Tim, Amber, and I had a beer together. When Amber left, we called it a night. He slept on the floor in front of the TV that night and every night he was at home on leave. Tim was dealing with the horrors of that first tour in his own way, and I didn’t ask any questions. Some days he never left the house. As he slowly decompressed, I told him there was no pressure, but when he was ready to talk, I would listen.

Colonel Roszak, the alumni director for the Corps of Cadets at Virginia Tech, called and asked Tim if he would participate in a new program called the Gunfighter Panel. Combat veterans from the corps were invited back to address undergraduate cadets on ways they could better prepare themselves for leading a platoon after graduation and commissioning. Tim accepted, and I met him at Tech two days before his twenty-fifth birthday to videotape the program. It was a great program; we were invited to a reception afterwards. Cadets attending the reception peppered Tim and the other speakers with questions. I thanked Colonel Roszak for the invitation and drove home. Tim stayed another day and then came home to get ready to fly back to Germany.

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He was relaxed his final night at home. I asked, "What one accomplishment from your first tour are you most proud of?"

I got an immediate answer. "Dad, that is way too easy. I am proud to say that I brought all my soldiers home alive and well."

I could feel the tears welling up as I hugged him and said, "I knew that's what you'd say." My son had matured into a hell of a good officer and I was damn proud to be his father.

The next morning, his mother, younger brother Tommy, his uncle Dan, and three cousins from Philly all met at Richmond International Airport for a good-bye breakfast. We put Tim on the plane to Frankfurt at 9:30 that morning. As he walked toward his gate in his BDUs, carrying his rucksack, he turned and raised a hand. I saluted him and watched him smile in return. It was the last time I saw my son.